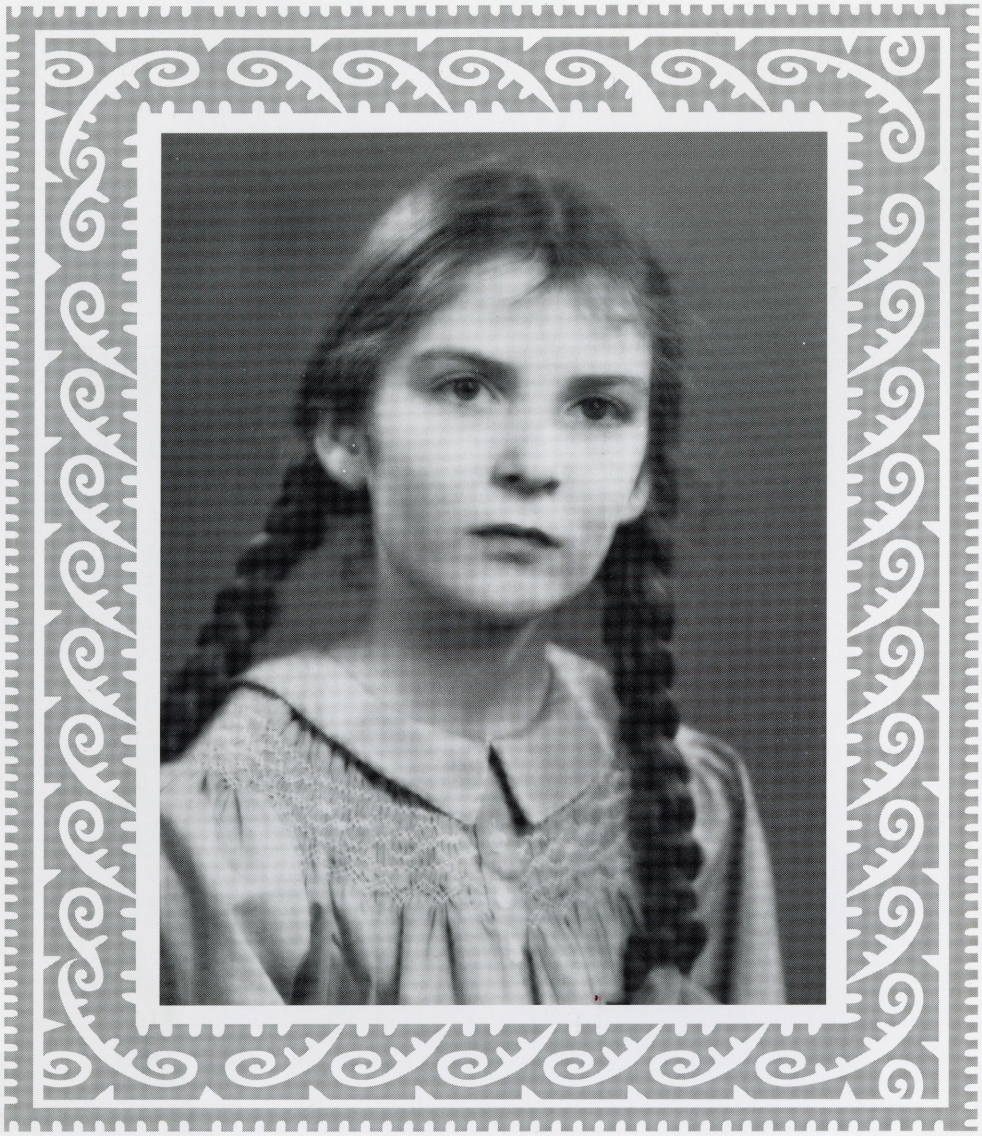
Marta Becket

A Theatrical Portrait

Before The

Amargosa Opera House



Myself at twelve years.

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COVER PHOTO - GLADYS LOUISE RICE

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A Child in New York

I was born in New York and lived the first five years of my life there, in Greenwich Village. At the age of three I developed a burning desire to dance. My favorite pastime was playing theatre which became an obsession I never outgrew.

My father was a newspaper reporter. Because of this he got passes to the best there was in concerts, opera, ballet, and the theatre. At least once a week he would take my mother and me to one of these events. Inspired by these experiences, I drew pictures, painted and danced around the apartment wearing the sleeves from my mother's old evening gowns for tights, while chiffon skirts became veils and scarves which fluttered to music from the gramaphone.

When I was six mother took me to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania to live, which abruptly ended my exposure to these inspiring events. When I was nine we moved to Philadelphia where I was able to get a scholarship in piano and art. Under the guidance of Antonio Cortizas I began developing as an artist.

By now the depression had hit the country. My parents divorced and it wasn't until I was twelve that mother and I returned to New York. Soon after that I attended Washington Irving High School, where I majored in art. Two evenings a week I took interpretive dancing at Greenwich House with Ingaborg Tarrup. After that I got a scholarship at Gluck Sandor's ballet school on 5th Avenue and eighteenth street. Although strict rules scoff at pointe shoes before three year's study, I was advised to buy my first pair after only two lessons. By now I was fourteen.

During this time I would present my ballet performances at assembly periods in high school. My presentations became so popular that I was permitted to go from class to class in my costume between performances.

At 5 years of age

After a year with Gluck Sandor I left to study with Mme. Duval who corrected the bad habits I had acquired from dancing on pointe too soon. It was Washington Irving High School and their scholarship fund that sponsored my new training and I was always very grateful for this. Now I was on the path to proper placement and a less flamboyant style.

It was now 1941. The Second World War started and at this time my mother encouraged me to quit high school because it was necessary to start earning money. The depression ended with its slow pace and everyone scrambled for survival.

We were fortunate to live next door to P.S. 41 on Greenwich Avenue because there I was able to create and rehearse my four classical and character routines that were eventually booked

The War Years and Hard Times

My first pair of toe shoes after only two lessons.

on the night club circuit. I was all too happy to devote my time fully now to dance. Although the art course was fulfilling and exciting, I was ready to make my life dancing and nothing else.

That New Year's Eve was the start of my career performing in tiny nightclubs in and around New York, Brooklyn and the Bronx. In between engagements I would perform at Army and Navy hospitals and on numerous occasions the Stage Door Canteen.

After I had performed in everything from nightclubs to large theatre restaurants, the night-club circuit for performers died. Times changed. The market for this kind of entertainment came to an end.

Because I was too tall for a ballet company, I auditioned for the corps de ballet at Radio City Music Hall. I was accepted. Only after much struggle and painful adjustment was I able to adapt to the requirements of being a corps dancer.

A year and a half at the Music Hall was followed by my dancing in the 1946 revival of SHOWBOAT, a Rogers and Hammerstein musical which played the Ziegfeld Theatre for a little over a year. After SHOWBOAT closed, I didn't dance for a while, due to my own disillusionment and hard times. I did some fashion modeling for top magazines and during evenings I did free lance art work. With this I was able to support my mother and me. During this time we lived in a cold water flat two blocks from Times Square.

It was through a strange and inexplicable experience I finally returned to dancing after two

Photo - Alfredo Valenti

Three years later in my Strauss costume.

Slavonic Dance.

On the Music Hall roof - between shows.

Photo - Vivian Cherry

In "Showboat" - 4th from left.

years. Through hard work and painful effort, twelve long weeks of it, I was dancing again. To dance again professionally as soon as possible I returned to Radio City Music Hall and worked in the corps for another year.

Following this second time at the Music Hall, I auditioned for George Abbott and Herb Ross and was chosen as one of four girl dancers for the musical *A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN* starring Shirley Booth. This musical played the Alvin Theatre for a little over a year. It was now 1951.

After this show closed a "would-be impresario" asked me to form a group of eighteen dancers and create six ballets with a distinctly oriental flavor. He had in mind conventions,

Fashion Shot

Photo - Gladys Louise Rice

Greek clubs and special parties for Ethnic groups in and around New York. Overjoyed at someone challenging me to such a creative test, I rounded up fifteen unemployed dancers whom I knew, arranged with a teacher friend of mine named Seda to rehearse in her studio free up at 181st street, and went to work. I did research in the daytime on all types of Oriental fairy tales and fables - Armenian, Turkish, Egyptian and Indian. I collected all the Middle East recordings I could find, and with what musical training I had arranged the sections I wanted for piano. I rehearsed with the dancers every evening for four months.

At this time I was making money doing a few television shows. However, my dancers were beginning to worry as the third month of rehearsal came and went. Our impresario would

attend rehearsals and certainly seemed pleased with the project, but I saw that he only dreamed. I saw there was going to be no money. Without money to back the project there would be no costumes, no musicians and no bookings. Soon I lost my dancers to summer engagements out at Jones Beach. Now I had nothing visible to show for the work I had done. However, it was still in my memory. I decided that with what was still in my memory I would go the rounds of the theatrical agents who booked the Straw Hat circuit for summer theatres. I felt sure that if I could interest someone in the project I could recruit my dancers all back.

There was one agent who had an office in the Palace Theatre building who was very interested. His name was Nat Jerome. He agreed to come to Seda's studio one very hot night. He was quite elderly, and being a large man as well, came up the stairs with difficulty. Seating him on a chair, I explained that I was going to play all the parts myself and told him that I could recruit all my dancers back at a moment's notice . . . if he should be interested. As I proceeded to dance out all the parts myself, turning records in between, with the hot light bulb hanging over my audition, I never dreamed that this particular evening would mark the turning point of my theatrical career. While I danced I could see Mr. Jerome in the twilight of the light bulb. He had a broad smile when I finished. Then he spoke.

"You don't need all those dancers. You have a unique idea here, dancing and playing all the parts yourself. I don't know of anyone who has done it before. Work on it. It will take time. I only wish one day I could see it. When you get around to having it ready . . . I will be gone."

Mr. Jerome smiled, patted me on the shoulder and left. Alone in Seda's studio I thought about this. What would I tell all my dancers who were waiting to hear the news? I really enjoyed playing all the parts myself, but never in this world thought I could put it across. I squirreled this idea in the back pocket of my mind for the future, packed my practice bag, and left for home.

Meanwhile I got into another George Abbott musical. This one was called *WONDERFUL TOWN*, starring Rosalind Russell, set to the music of Leonard Bernstein. It opened January 19th, 1953. This show, like the others, lasted for a little over a year. During this period I began planning a repertoire of my own choreography using the suggestions made by Nat Jerome. I

Photo - Fernand Fonnsagrives

A composite photo taken at rehersal of "The Mirror, The Carpet & The Lemon.

started with the Turkish Fairy Tale I had auditioned that night for Mr. Jerome. Originally it had nine characters. I reduced it to four, playing the three princes by wearing masks, and a quick change to veil and skirt for the King's Daughter. This ballet was called *THE MIRROR, THE CARPET, AND THE LEMON.* This particular work remained in my repertoire until 1979.

At this time an old acquaintance from fashion modeling days met me on the street and advised me to go see the art director at Doubleday publishers. He told me they were looking for an artist to do the drawings for George Balanchine's STORIES OF THE GREAT BALLETS. I followed his advice and ended up illustrating not only George Balanchine's book but one by Walter Terry as well. Mr. Terry was the dance critic for the New York Herald Tribune. Needless to say, the years of 1953-54 were busy indeed, what with plans to create my own solo program for the concert circuit, illustrating two books on dance, and performing nightly in *WONDERFUL TOWN* at the Wintergarden Theatre.

I was now 29 and had no regrets leaving the world of the Broadway gypsy. It was time for a transition, a time to grow, to try my wings. If I didn't do it now, later would be too late. All my friends however continued to audition for shows slated for production. Many got jobs. Many didn't. I looked ahead at what I chose to do. At that time I didn't have a single prospect. But it was time to take the chance. I will never have this time again I thought. I will never be 29 again. I could see the years ahead of me. I must use them while they are mine. Time . . the only irreplaceable thing in life.

After *WONDERFUL TOWN* closed, I concentrated full effort on my repertoire. I designed all the costumes and my mother made them as she had done for my nightclub act years ago.

During this time there was no income, so I was forced to collect unemployment insurance. This helped sustain my mother and me during this financially dry period. As my repertoire became more polished and rehearsals were looking more and more like performances, I began making the rounds of concert managers. Finally I succeeded in obtaining one single booking for an hour concert in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, at Teacher's State College there. Even though this booking was a whole year away, I was excited and determined that this event would mark the beginning of the life I had always wanted as a dancer.

In the meantime I secured a job in a window display studio designing sets for department stores. I sat up front at a desk in a show room which resembled a stage set for Christmas, Easter and Autumn displays. My designs sold for $200 each, while I made only $1.25 an hour. This was all right with me however because punching a time clock allowed me the freedom to take time off for auditions or leave town for possible tour engagements. This way

Photo - Morris Beck

Rehersing for "Wonderful Town" with Billy Weslow.

On The Road

I still had the security of having a job when I returned.

The day finally came for the concert in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, which was set for September 29th, 1954. My costumes were packed in big fibre cases with record player and records carried separately. I took the Trailways bus from 49th street and headed through the Holland Tunnel for points unknown.

The ordeal I went through to do this particular concert consisted of a twenty-four hour trip with three bus changes, followed by a lighting rehearsal that night. After the concert next morning at 9:00 a.m., the arduous trip repeated itself. My concert fee was $109.00 out of which the manager took his 33 1/3 percent. My bus fare round trip took over half the concert fee, so in all I was left with nothing but the experience of having done it.

Both Photos - Fernand Fonnsagrives

Back to the display studio again, I continued to pursue my dream. I took two days off each week to rehearse and make contacts. I was fortunate in having the opportunity to audition for the National Music League which was having a special showcase for the University of Minnesota Concert Series. This was held in the famous Carnegie Recital Hall. From this exposure I secured a three week engagement of 15 concerts the following summer of 1956 throughout Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa. I was now beginning to feel alive. I came home that summer with excellent reviews.

Working With A Manager

Through this success I was becoming more confident in going the direction that I had set for myself. However, I still did not have a permanent concert manager. Although I seemed to be doing pretty well on my own, having a manager (perhaps a father image), or an impresario behind me would add a certain stability to this effort in striking out on my own. It would also give me more time to create. As for an impresario, I hadn't realized that the days of the impresario were long gone.

At this time I auditioned my entire repertoire for a manager who seemed to be the only one who responded from a long list I had interviewed. He was genuinely enthusiastic about my repertoire and said he would like to sign me up for a three year contract. My heart soon fell, however, when he told me that he would need a retainer fee to cover promotion, brochures, posters and travel expenses when going out on the road to sell my attraction.

Photo - Fernand Fonsagrives

"The Urchin's Dream" - from early repertoire.

The King's Daugher - from "The Mirror, The Carpet & The Lemon."

"Your program is great," he said. "I think we can do something. However, I have a suggestion." He looked serious.

"What is that," I asked with apprehension?

''The second dance you did is a very technical and difficult one to do. In ten years you won't be able to do it. It's going to take you ten years to get established. What do you plan on doing then?"

"But I'm ready now," I said with concern.

"Yes, you are ready but the public isn't ready. The public will have to hear about you, be reminded of you...over and over again. This takes money...time...ten years." He stared at me with an expression that challenged.

I didn't believe him. Would I be required to tailor my choreography to what I might be able to do in ten years? Why couldn't my dancing evolve (like time itself) from what I could do now to what I will do then? I realized that this man who stared back at me as I stood in my costume at the end of the audition held my dream in his hand.

The next day I paid him a retainer. It was the entire amount I had received from the two books I had illustrated for Doubleday. I then signed a three year contract with him and waited for whatever was to come next.

Today, when I look back on this incident, I see now that this manager was right. What he said was true. It does take ten years. Sometimes more. It also takes money. This was the only

concert manager I ever knew who revealed this. He laid the cards on the table and waited to see if I'd play the game. I did have the money he needed from the books I had illustrated. I reasoned that that was what it was meant for. As for time, I had some. Not as much as I would like, but enough to say "yes," I'll play the game. By this time I was 31.

For the next three years my concert engagements increased. After another three week tour for the University of Minnesota I did a guest appearance with the Charleston Ballet in West Virginia. Following that came another guest appearance with the Buffalo Philharmonic. An eleven week tour for schools followed that which was booked by the Red Path Bureau which took me up to the New England States. That winter of 1959 I did a twenty-one week tour for the University of Wisconsin. These school tours required a great deal of stamina because there were three performances a day with some 200 mile drives in between. For these tours I hired a young college student to drive me from town to town, and act as my stage-manager. The stage-manager for my college tours was provided by the university.

The Sage on top of the mountain.

Photos - Fernand Fonnsagrives

It was now spring of 1959. There was a short

From "Gossip" - which is in my repertoire to this day.

dry spell. My three year contract with the present manager was up, and I was seriously looking for one who could get me out of the school circuit and book more concerts in colleges, universities and concert associations. While I was undecided about what to do next, I was offered the opportunity to sign a contract with National Concert and Artists Corporation. I remember walking down the corridors after signing. I was surrounded by posters of great artists such as Arturo Toscanini, Marian Anderson, Lorenz Mechior, and Kirsten Flagstadt, to say nothing of the Ballet Russe De Monte Carlo. Feeling the security of at last finding a management with significant standing, I was oblivious to the fact that N.CA.C. was about to be sold to a music publishing company. Fortunately there was no retainer fee required here, just commission from each engagement. Within the two year period I had with them, I had exactly one concert booked. I wonder to this day why they signed me.

It was at this same time I met my future husband, Tom Williams. Showing interest in my program, he displayed a genuine desire to try and book it, become my manager and my companion on the road, as well as for life. Because he had been in advertising we both felt his knowledge would be an asset to promoting my show. Together we did some concerts in and around the New York area.

A very exciting engagement turned up that summer which we did together at Notre Dame University for the National Catholic Theatre Conference there. This was the first time I did a lecture along with my program. The audience I had there consisted of priests, nuns, cardinals and bishops from all over the world.

In June of 1962 we were married. Tom began to book my program through the mail. He took some fine pictures of me in costume and made up some brochures. Bookings began to materialize. At the same time I took some of my early paintings to an unknown gallery in Greenwich Village out of financial desperation. These early paintings, done mostly on shirt cardboards, began to sell. There was a demand for more paintings which led to my working on sanded masonite with the casein medium.

By fall of 1962 Tom had secured a tour of about nine engagements for spring. They were far and in between and would eventually take us out West. I was excited. For the first time my paintings sales burgeoned and helped support the cost of touring expenses.

Up until this time I had never been further

"The Mirror, The Carpet & The Lemon" was lengthened to 45 minutes for school tours.

Guesting with the Charleston Ballet & Andre Van Damme.

Going West For The First Time

West than Minnesota. This first tour to the West coast was the first of six such tours. At this time we were fortunate to have access to bookings on the Community Concert circuit. Soon our dates consisted of half being college and university dates and the other half Community Concert engagements.

During this time the owner of the small gallery in Greenwich Village died. I had to find another outlet for my paintings. I went over to the Waverly Gallery off Washington Square. By now I was doing some very serious painting. Large allegorical subjects, street scenes, city parks and many theatrical subjects. The Waverly Gallery wanted to plan on a one woman show of my work for which I was very enthusiastic. I worked hard on this exhibit and hoped in some small way it would help me get recognized as a serious painter. The date for the grand opening was November 23rd, 1963.

When the news of the assassination of President Kennedy flashed headlines on all the newsstands and the air waves carried word for word descriptions of the terrible event, I knew my debut as a painter was not to be. The Waverly Gallery, which was supposed to be lit, full of people celebrating my opening night and drinking champagne while my dreams were revealed on the walls for the first time ever, was dark and locked up.

Slavonic Dance

Guesting with the Charleston Ballet & Andre Van Damme.

The Merchant and the Sage were two additional characters, plus scenery for four scene changes.

Changing Times

The event I had looked forward to came and went just like another day.

During December, however, things brightened up a bit with three concerts on the children's series at New York's Town Hall.

That January of 1964 we went out on another tour to the West Coast. This time we had more Community Concerts than colleges. We were beginning to notice a difference in the selection of attractions the universities booked. The solo performer was having a hard time. The one person show was no longer in vogue. Now big rock bands were the rage. The soloist who played an instrument, danced, or sang was no longer 'in.' 1964 marked the beginning of the flower children.

When we returned to New York late that spring, I changed art galleries again and went uptown to a small gallery in Carnegie Hall. This gallery too expressed a desire to have a one woman show of my work. They seemed to be doing a good job, and the location was excellent exposure. I became excited again over such a prospect. That date for this second debut of my paintings was November 10th, 1965. Since we were to go out on tour soon after that, it was perfect timing.

Ferry Boat - Casein - 1963

While we were putting on the final touches to hanging my paintings, the lights suddenly began to flicker... and then go out. The lights and signs on Broadway, 7th Avenue and 57th

La Grande Performance

Photos by Tom Williams

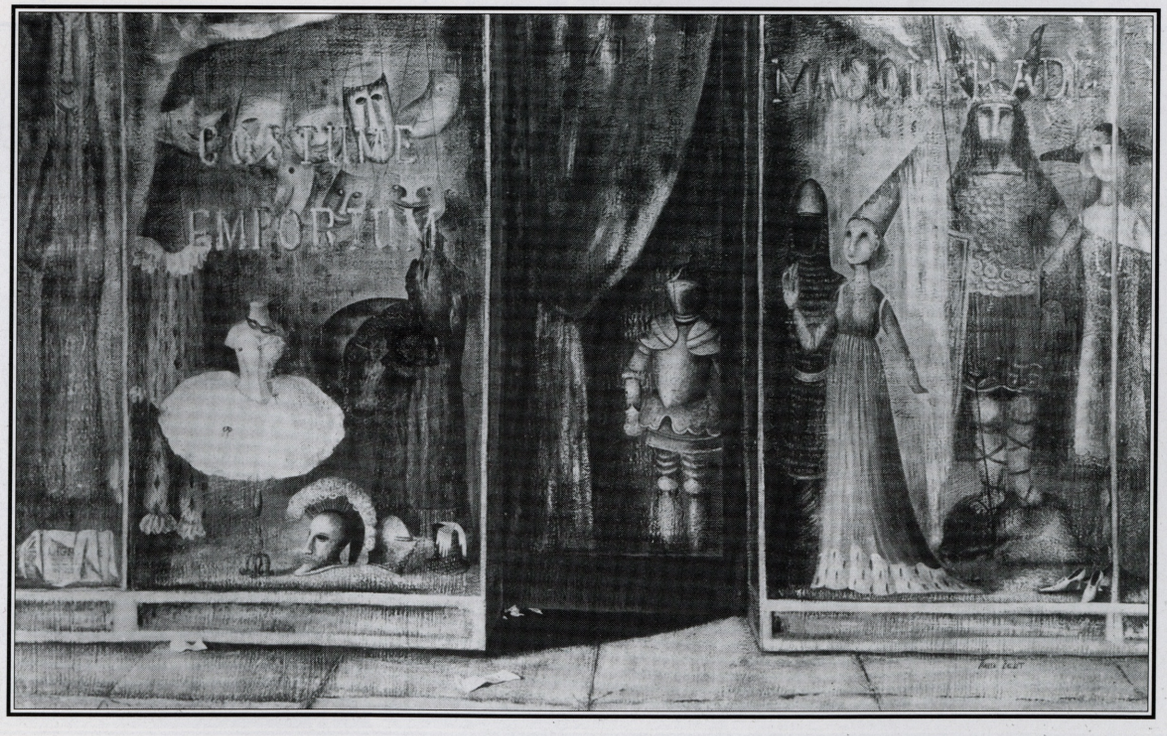
Street went out. Suddenly New York was in total darkness. Again, the opening of my art show passed unnoticed, eclipsed by the famous blackout of 1965. For me it was just another day. For New York it was a major event. We went home by moonlight through the crowds of Times Square. It all seemed like a bad dream.

My paintings continued to sell in the Carnegie Hall Gallery. In spite of two openings which were cancelled due to circumstances beyond my control, the demand for my work inspired me to serious painting between concert tours.

The tour for the 1965-66 season was about to begin. There were fewer colleges and universities than ever and more Community Concert engagements. Each season we noticed fewer theatres and suitable halls for programs such as mine. It made me sad to see old opera houses and legitimate theatres being torn down in so many small towns across the country. More and more I either had to perform in a school gymnasium or the dining room of a woman's club. The magic was disappearing. The aura that a real theatre has with its Baroque interior,

Bleeker Street - Casein - 1963

plush seats, velvet curtains and gilded molding provided a visual overture to the attraction about to be presented. An audience isn't really ready for a concert, opera or ballet waiting in gymnasium bleachers for it to begin. Now when we went out on tour it felt much like the nightclub era dissolving before our very eyes while performing the last few engagements available. It must have felt the same way to the performing artists in Vaudeville, those final years when Vaudeville theatres turned into movie houses,



Costume Emporium - Casein

the small time theatrical agencies locked their doors, and the leftovers were forced to roam Broadway or sit in the Automat dreaming of the old days.

For the spring tour of 1967 my husband Tom had booked 21 concerts. This tour again was to take us to the West coast. By now we had bought a trailer in order to eliminate hotel expenses.

Shortly before we left to go out on tour, a good friend of ours expressed the wish to give us a going away party at a friend's apartment who happened to be psychic. She thought an evening of fortune telling would be a festive send-off. We went but I remember being devastated at being told this would be my final tour. The psychic told me that I would be leaving New York and moving to a very far off and rural place.

At the time I was a dyed-in-the-wool New Yorker who believed that any artist who left what was considered the art center of the world was either mad, considering retirement, or subconsciously acting out a death wish. The psychic also said that the letter "A" predominated and that here in this place I would be doing the most satisfying work of my life. The only work I could imagine doing in a rural setting was farming. I left the apartment feeling dejected and trying to figure out why in the world I would be tempted to stop dancing and take up farming.

That January of 1967 we started out on our tour. Each season there were fewer college and university engagements. As we moved westward we knew the concert circuit was changing. By the time spring came we were weary from traveling.

Tom was becoming discouraged with his efforts to sell my program to colleges and universities. As we toured, he would call on the local colleges and universities, write letters, and try to promote business for the next season. More and more demand for the big rock bands replaced the solo attraction. Although the Community Concerts still bought solo artists, there were fewer towns that had concert series because of the advent of television, local basketball, or church meetings. While biding time in small towns between engagements Tom would spend his time on these activities while I would either practice, paint, or wash tights.

On the outside it was a happy life. Underneath however the undercurrent of uncertainty was ever present. The market for my kind of

Park Scene - Casein - 1963

Concessionaire - Casein - 1964

My name on the marquis at the Avenue Theatre in Du Bois, Pennsylvania

attraction was dying. I strongly rejected the thought, however, of hopping from one vocation to another simply because the wind blew from another direction. I had devoted my entire life to dancing. My childhood was spent dreaming about it...later on studying to be a dancer...working as a dancer and finally, bringing it all into my own world which I was not about to give up. I could not allow my art to die, even if I were the only one left who cared about it. If I allowed everything I lived and worked for to simply fade into nothingness because no one was left to share it, I would die too. I wasn't ready for that. I wasn't about ready to trade my reason for living in favor of security, three meals a day, and a roof over my head.

By the time we had reached California it was Easter. There was a lull in our tour. We decided to camp in Death Valley for a week's vacation. We camped behind the visitor's center, enjoyed the beautiful scenery, warm air and the magical star- spangled nights.

One morning we woke up to find we had a flat tire on our trailer. From one of the park rangers there we learned the best place to have it repaired was Death Valley Junction. Ever so slowly we limped our way out of Death Valley and onto Highway 190 which took us straight to Death Valley Junction. By the time we reached Death Valley Junction it was noon. Turning right at the end of 190 and onto 127, we limped on over into what resembled a Mexican village of adobe houses and then larger structures. We pulled over to the large garage which had a filling station out front looking like something from out of the 20's. Tom proceeded to repair the tire on the trailer while I had some moments to explore.

As I gazed down the long colonnade of what was known as the Amargosa Hotel, I remembered having seen it before. I had been at the end of a tour in 1964. It was dusk then, with the damp mist of drizzle hanging in the air. The adobe buildings were hardly visible. Now as I stood in the noonday sun gazing at this long colonnade, I remembered expressing a wish to return, perhaps to paint for a long time. It was as if I suddenly found myself in a place where time stopped. An invisible wall seemed to surround this place - impenetrable, creating a retreat from today. My eyes then wandered down the colonnade to where it turned a

Facade - Armagosa Hotel

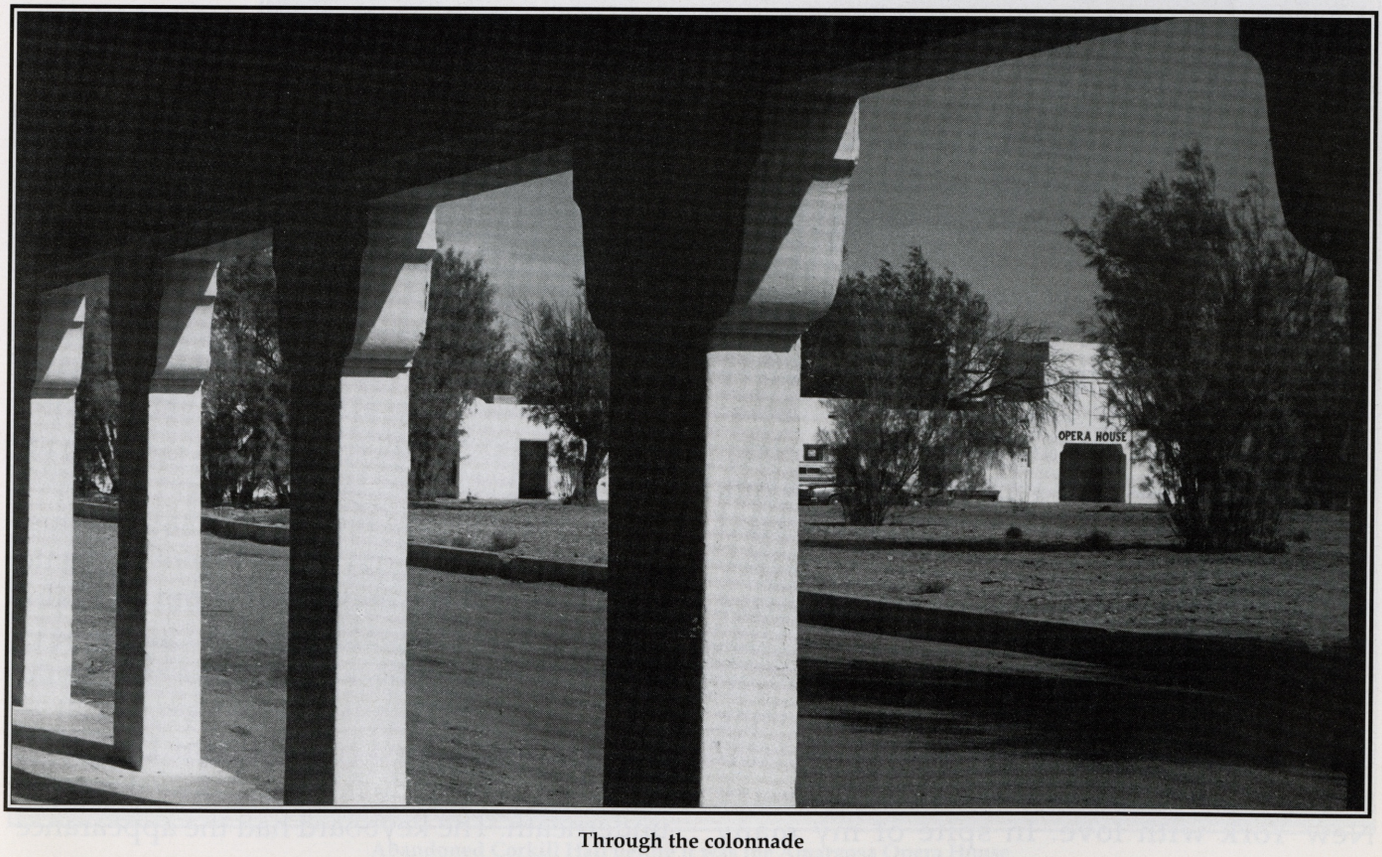
corner. Smaller buildings with gates leading to possible courtyards continued and suddenly my eyes fell on the largest structure in the row. It was a theatre! I couldn't believe it. Hypnotically I was drawn down to this structure. By now I had forgotten the tire. I completely forgot about where we were going next. I walked over to the building, afraid to take my eyes off of it lest it should disappear.

I then wandered around the back, accelerating my step until I found myself in a courtyard shaded by large Tamarisk trees. There was a back door, possibly a stage door, I thought. I peered through a hole in the door to see inside. A few sunbeams pierced the dark interior. Finally my eyes were able to make out a small stage with faded calico curtains hanging from a track. Debris was strewn all over the warped floor boards, and several rows of wooden benches faced the stage. Some old roller skates lay up front, and directly at the foot of the sunbeam was a doll's head with its blue glass eyes staring back at me. Pockets of dust and sand provided a backdrop for Kangaroo rats and desert spiders.

It was obvious the theatre had been abandoned for some time. It seemed to be the only unused building in Death Valley Junction. As I peered through the tiny hole, I had the distinct feeling that I was looking at the other half of myself. The building seemed to be saying, "Take me...do something with me...I offer you life."

Like the theatre, I too was beginning to feel unused. A dancer cannot stay in form and be artistically fulfilled touring four months with only twenty-one concerts, to say nothing of road expenses and the cost of studio space to practice during weeks of layoff. I continued gazing through the small hole in the door knowing at that very moment I had to have that theatre. I would find a new life in it and in so doing perhaps I would be giving it life. Here I would have the time and space to commission myself to do work that no one else would ever ask me to do.

I ran down to the filling station where my husband Tom had just finished repairing the tire.



Through the colonnade

Words came out faster than I could articulate them. Eventually, he got the message. Soon we were both headed back to the theatre, around to the courtyard where I pointed to the hole through which he would be able to see. Without a word to one another, we both knew that as we looked through the hole we were looking at our future.

Tom had always wanted to leave New York so I guess my enthusiasm offered him the chance to leave sooner than he'd thought. For me this tiny theatre cast its spell. Suddenly New York was no longer the art center of the world. For me now the world can have New York. I wanted this theatre.

We had to go to Las Vegas for a mail pickup that afternoon. On the way we talked of nothing else but the tiny theatre in Death Valley Junction. From a newsy letter from my mother we learned that New York's great Metropolitan Opera House was slated for the wrecker's ball. Something about this news only strengthened our determination to return to Death Valley Junction next day and see if we couldn't arrange to rent the theatre for ourselves.

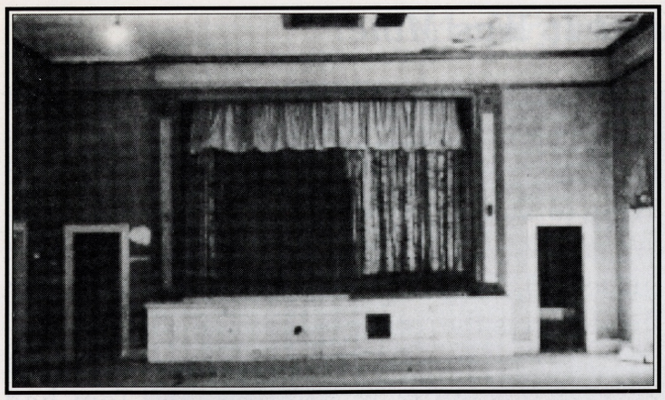
There was something positive about leaving New York now, not later, after everything beautiful had been destroyed because it was deemed unnecessary. I wanted to remember New York with love. In spite of my many disappointments there, New York provided me with a background I could not have gotten anywhere else.

We returned to Death Valley Junction next day and located the town manager in his apartment behind the Amargosa Hotel.

"It's a mess," he remarked as he unlocked the double doors in the front of the theatre. The swinging doors fanned out. A cloud of dust like a scrim lifted revealing the spacious interior which yawned before us from its twenty year sleep. After the dust had settled I could see the tiny stage at the opposite end of the room. The once beautiful oak floor was warped from leaks and was covered with debris. The old wooden benches faced the stage waiting for the next performance. It hadn't occurred to me that perhaps the next performance might be mine. I suddenly looked down. There at my feet at the end of a sunbeam was the doll's head, staring at me with her blue glass eyes.

The filling station at Death Valley Junction as it was in 1964.

I walked toward the stage through the dust and debris. Up the tiny stairs I went and onto the stage. It too was warped from the rain. An upright piano stood directly under a hole in the rafters. The hole was so large you could see daylight through it. Rain water as well as daylight had spilled onto the old keyboard, causing the ivories to fall and expose the wood underneath. The keyboard had the appearance



Interior - Corkill Hall ...as I first saw it.

of a smiling mouth with some missing teeth - A-sort-of grimace against the elements. A defiant grin against the glaring sky and the pouring rain. "Somebody didn't know any better...to move the piano to another spot," I thought.

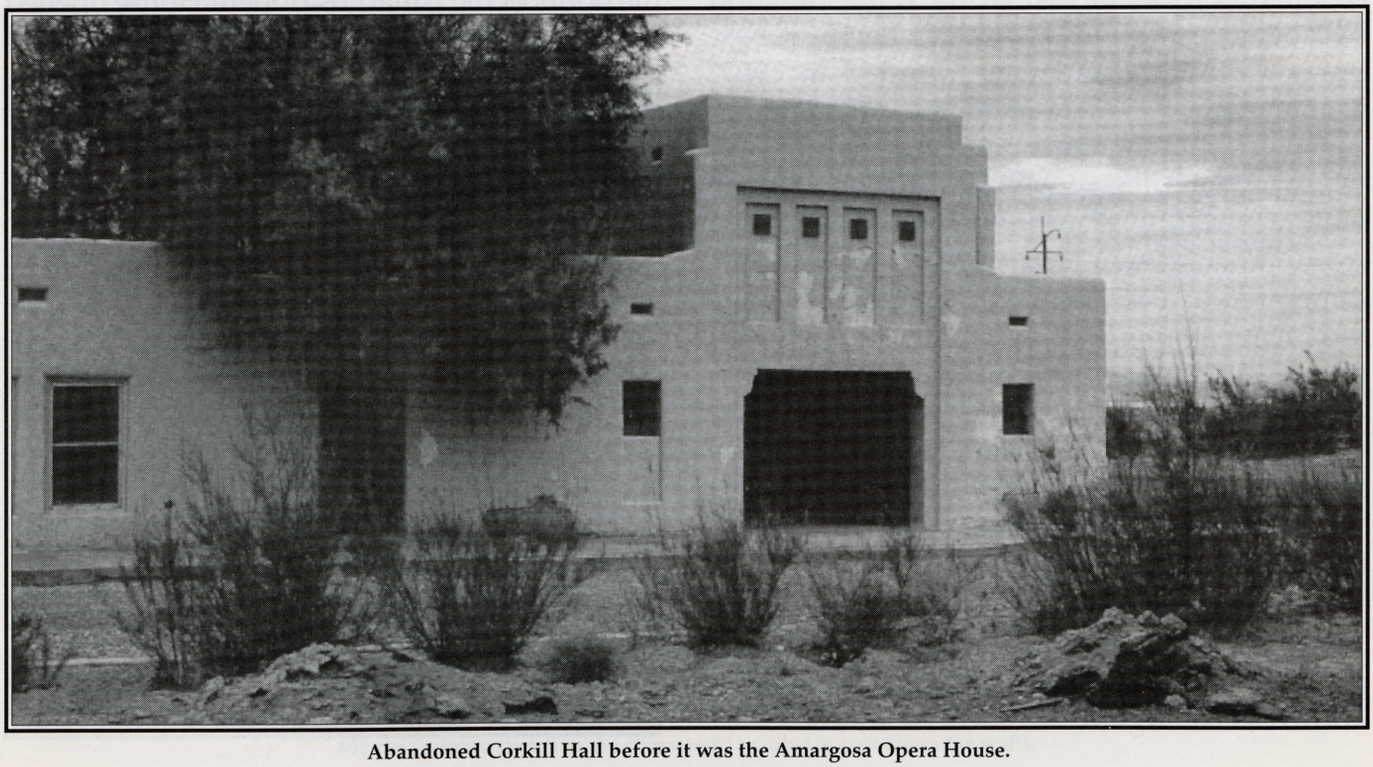
The keyboard with the missing teeth smiled back at me as if to say, "That's life kid, ...nobody around here who cared... until someone hauls me off to the dump."

"As for me," I thought to myself, "I don't have to wait for someone to move me, or offer me a better life. I will move myself to a better life here in Death Valley Junction before it is too late. I was far more fortunate than that old piano. Then I looked at the tiny stage.

"Perhaps," I mused, "it could be enlarged." Even though the stage was small, if it were mine for the rest of my life it would be the biggest stage I ever had. Here I would not have to wait for someone to book me. I would not have to please agents, managers, or a public whose taste changes like the wind. I would please myself. I would work and create without the official nod from critics. I had found my place in the sun. We will open the doors and if people would come, it would be wonderful. If they didn't come, I would have my stage...my space...my empty canvas.

Walking back to where the manager and my husband were talking, I felt as if I had just been given a shot of new life. I realized I had been slowly dying. The doors which had opened to me just a few years ago when I started concertizing in 1955 were closing. Suddenly another door opened. I will now have my own stage. Before this I had to depend and wait for a booking in order to have a stage, and when I had it, it wasn't really mine. I simply borrowed it for a few hours.

We made a simple agreement on a scrap of paper and gave the manager a dollar bill and a handshake. The theatre was now ours for $45.00 a month. We agreed to assume responsibilities



Abandoned Corkill Hall before it was the Amargosa Opera House.

for repairs and return the following August for good. To prove to ourselves the 'reality' of our theatre, we took photographs to assure us it 'really was' on our way back East.

We returned to Death Valley Junction that August of 1967. A recent rain showed what condition the roof was really in now. The yellowish walls were stained with muddy streaks, and the floor more warped than ever. Debris and junk were removed, the curtains were taken down and the sad piano with its ever-smiling row of missing teeth went out to the dump to grin indefinitely at the very sky and elements that sent it to its inevitable destiny.

No matter how we patched the roof, nothing seemed to help. The water would just move from place to place after each rain. Taking advantage of a short dry spell, Tom proceeded to paint the walls white, both inside and out. I made a front stage curtain of red corduroy. Tom put up stage lights constructed out of coffee cans. After we decided the stage could be made a bit larger, he extended it four feet to the front as my Christmas present.

We hadn't learned very much about this place from the local people. The postmaster in Death Valley told us that Death Valley Junction had been headquarters for the Pacific Coast Borax Company and was founded in 1907. In the years of 1923-24-25 the Borax Company constructed a company town consisting of a U-shape complex of Mexican Colonial style buildings of adobe to house company offices, store, dormitory, a twenty three room hotel, dining room, lobby, and employee's headquarters. A recreation hall was built at the North East of the complex and was used as a community center for dances, church services, movies, weddings, funerals, and town meetings. At the time it was known as Corkill Hall. The architect who designed the town was Alexander Hamilton McCulloch.

Death Valley Junction became a town of some consequence with railroads, a mill, and a population of 300. Before 1907 the town was known as Amargosa.

I decided to rename Corkill Hall and call it the Amargosa Opera House. I learned that it was built the year that I was born, 1924. We moved West to start a new life in August of 1967. We arrived August 9th, my birthday. I had just turned 43. Indeed, perhaps this little theatre in the desert is the 'other half of myself.'

As the months went by we lived on a meagre income from printing jobs Tom had acquired from the local people. He had bought a small press and by hand turned out business cards and wedding announcements.

I on the other hand, started a ballet class made up of local children between the ages of six and fourteen.

During this time we decided we had better open the theatre whether it was ready or not. The date we set to open the doors to the public was February 10th, 1968. The night for the big premiere finally came. I danced for an audience of twelve adults, children and grandchildren. All of them lived in Death Valley Junction. It rained that night, so to the accompaniment of strategically placed coffee cans, I performed, to the hypnotic effect of dripping water, Strauss, Dvorák and Tchaikovsky. From that time on the doors of the Amargosa Opera House opened without fail Friday, Saturday and Monday

Amargosa Grand Opening

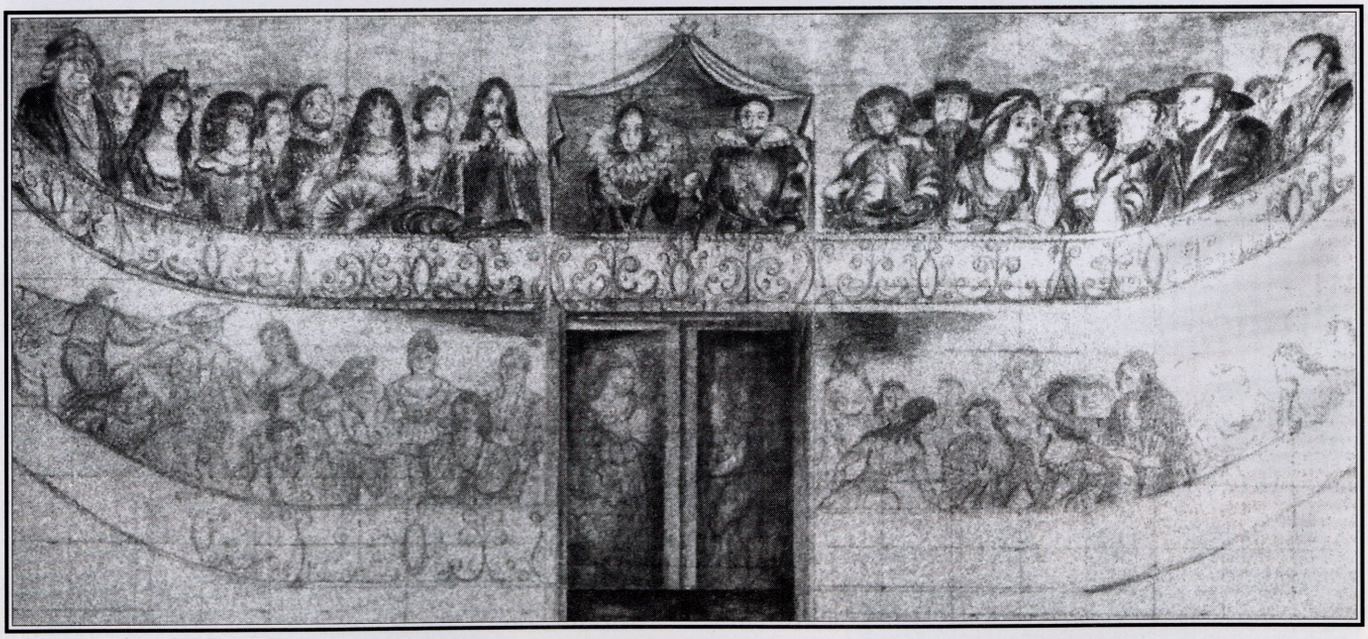
Photos - Tom Williams

Photos of the 2nd year recital - Amargosa Opera House.

evening at 7:45 p.m., and the curtain parted promptly at 8:15. Our audiences consisted of locals and curious tourists; sometimes no one at all came. At one such performance, we started the overture and I commenced to dance. In the middle of my first piece four people came in. As it turned out, two of these people were on the staff of the National Geographic Magazine. They wrote a story about the incident and from then on it has become well known that at the Amargosa Opera House, the 8:15 curtain waits for no one.

In July, 1968 we had a terrible flash flood. Death Valley Junction stood in twelve inches of muddy water. It took a week to squeegee the mud from out of the opera house. While taking a break from this chore one afternoon I gazed up at the blank white walls now streaked again from recent rainwater and instantly envisioned a Renaissance audience completely surrounding me, gazing down from the walls and onto the stage.

"I am going to paint an audience on the walls of this theatre," I exclaimed. No one would believe me! Tom wouldn't believe me! He didn't believe me until one day I presented him with a sketch for the rear wall complete with balconies filled with characters who might have attended an opera back in the 16th century. The sketch was scaled to life size. The next step was to



My preliminary sketch of the characters I wanted to paint onto the walls.

acquire a scaffold. Finding one for $125.00, we wasted no time bringing it back from Las Vegas to Death Valley Junction, setting it up, and getting to work.

From the King and Queen center, to royalty, nobility, bullfighters, monks and nuns, the walls came to life. Two of our cats, Rhubarb and Tuxedo, grace each end as they sleep on red velvet cushions.

In three months the entire rear wall was completed, including the inside of the double doors upon which I painted a lady dancing to an accompaniment provided by a musician playing an antique musical instrument. By now my inspiration soared.

Turning the corner, more characters from out of the past spilled onto the walls from my imagination, from ladies of the night to gypsies, from revelers to a group of royal children tended by a governess who is being courted by a gentleman seated in the balcony above.

American Indians discovered by the Spanish in the early 16th century grace the walls at the bottom, performing various feats of skill and chance for the entertainment of the King and Queen. Upon these walls I had created a world of the past. Inevitably this whole effort became a religious experience. Reclaiming a heritage from centuries ago which I saw being destroyed the past several years, I now created my own opera house as a dedication to those now buried in the so-called rubble of progress. To complete my world I painted a marble statue in the center of the West wall. He is holding a scroll which is written in Latin:

THE WALLS OF THIS THEATRE
AND I
DEDICATE THESE MURALS
TO THE PAST
WITHOUT WHICH OUR TIMES
WOULD HAVE NO BEAUTY
Fin- 1972

It took four years to complete the murals. During this time the audiences grew. 105

garden chairs were acquired through the donations of trading stamps from our patrons. A nine foot concert grand piano arrived as a gift from Mr. and Mrs. Ellsworth Johnson of Spokane, Washington. More stories were written about the Opera House in the desert, in national magazines and newspapers. The Opera House has also been aired on television, starting with *THE GREAT MOHAVE DESERT* for National Geographic.

Even with all that we had accomplished by 1972, we were still renting the theatre. I had just given four years of my life to its walls. There were many, including the art gallery back in New York that sold my paintings, who chided me as foolish. The murals could never be removed, sold or bought. From the very first brush stroke

Marta's "Audience" Arrives

Photos by Rogers

my world of the past was owned by someone who didn't even know it was there. These critics would never understand that the experience I had creating this mural was worth more than anything anyone could offer me for it. Yes, I knew it was possible our theatre could be taken away from us. But I knew too that those four years I spent painting it could never be taken away from me. They will be with me always, wherever I go.

We celebrated the completion of the mural that August of 1972. In a way the celebration was sad because it marked the end of the most fulfilling years of my life up until then.

When the party was over and after everyone had gone, I looked up at the ceiling and immediately saw that those four happy years could be extended - perhaps two or three years. I got to work and made a scaled sketch for the ceiling. The scaffold was extended and for two following summers I stood every day on the scaffold painting a blue sky filled with dancing cherubs, billowing clouds, the four winds in each

corner and a central dome with sixteen ladies playing antique musical instruments. I completed the ceiling by painting seven doves flying overhead for peace.

Looking back, I realize the fortune teller was right when she told us we'd be leaving New York. She was right when she said I'd be doing the most satisfying work of my life in a very rural and faraway place. I remember too that she said the letter "A" predominated. Perhaps Amargosa had been fated in my life from the beginning.

Since 1974, when the ceiling was completed, many things transpired. To preserve the Opera House we realized the only way to accomplish this would be to unite the town of Death Valley Junction with the Amargosa Opera House. This would create friendly and sympathetic surroundings for the arts.

Through help and legal advice from friends and through the Trust for Public Land based in San Francisco, the Amargosa Opera House, Inc. bought the town of Death Valley Junction.

On December 10th, 1981 the town of Death Valley Junction was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Photos - Lauren Aspinwall

Central portion of the Amargosa Opera House ceiling.

In January of 1983, my husband Tom, who up until this time was President of Amargosa Opera House, Inc., resigned from the corporation and left for other interests.

On January 14th the same year Mr. Thomas J. Willett stepped in as my stage manager and M.C. and helped me finish out the season of 1983.

That spring the Opera House bought 120 theatre seats from the Boulder Theatre in Boulder City, Nevada, thus replacing the old garden chairs which had worn out by this time.

In April of 1984 the Amargosa Opera House paid off a mortgage on Death Valley Junction of $26,500.00. Inspired by this real life drama of keeping the villain away from the door, I created a melodrama entitled *THE SECOND MORTGAGE* which was premiered November 23rd, 1983.

Since the Second Mortgage, eight later works have been incorporated into the program, utilizing the comedic talents of Thomas Willett who either acts as performing stage-manager playing a part, or co-starring with me, giving

my presentation an added humor to the classical ambience it originally started with in 1968.

A broader audience has emerged from this change to encompass classical dance, music, and art with the pantomimic humor provided by the roles I have created for Mr. Willett! The Amargosa Opera House has exposed thousands to a first time experience of live theatre because they have learned they can have a good time recognizing themselves on stage through comedy as well as through classical dance and pantomime. To accompany our performances, only classical music is used which exposes first time listeners to sounds which hopefully will inspire them to seek further avenues in this field.

From 1983 to the present, life has not been one continual utopia! I almost lost Death Valley Junction several times to those individuals who came in the guise of "help." Expensive lawsuits resulted in money being spent which should have been spent on Death Valley Junction, or the Opera House.

In 1986 I was saved from the burden of a first mortgage on Death Valley Junction of $64,412.00 for which I was making monthly payments each month. Jean Bennett of Ridgecrest, California came forth with her offer to lift this burden from me which has resulted in those monthly payments now going toward maintaining this historic town and its Amargosa Opera House! For this, I am most grateful because since then I might not have been able to make those monthly payments.

Photo - Rogers

Our original "seats."

Portion of side wall with my audience.

To survive as an artist is more important to me than anything! As long as I live, for the Amargosa Opera House, THE SHOW WILL GO ON, (though obviously it will change through the years.) The eight fifteen curtain will wait for no one!

I have been able to share my dreams because a public comes to share them with me. I have been able to keep on creating new works because of a supportive guild membership who believes in my work. I want to thank all those who presently support and give of their time. To those who did so in the past, I want to thank as well.

I do not plan for the years ahead. I don't try to attempt to guess what I will be able to do ten years from now. At present, I dance, and I continue to paint. I have my stage to call my own. My imagination has carried me on a journey from the past to the present. From New York to Death Valley Junction...and a tiny theatre nobody wanted.

I dare not question where I go from here. I do not predict big plans for my art and the town of Death Valley Junction. Instead...I work. I do the best I can. I am grateful to have found the place where I can fulfill my dreams and share them with the passing scene...for as long as I can.

Looking Back and Looking Ahead...

Photo - Tom Williams - 1976

Maxi, from "Maxi's Burlesk."

Photo - Tom Williams - 1976

Columbine, from "Curtain Raiser."

Photo - Mary Walter Scodwell

Mending toe shoes in the theatre with my companion, Goldstein.

Photo -Aina Balgalvis

As 'Ted Benny' in "Come Back Vaudeville."

Photo - Mary Walter Scodwell

Scene from "The Second Mortgage."

...And The Shows Go On!

Thomas Willett as Jed Starr and myself as Mazie Dream in front of the glass window of Goldies Rehersal Hall (painted on backdrop) —from the production "Comeback Vaudeville."

All Photos - Tony Scodwell

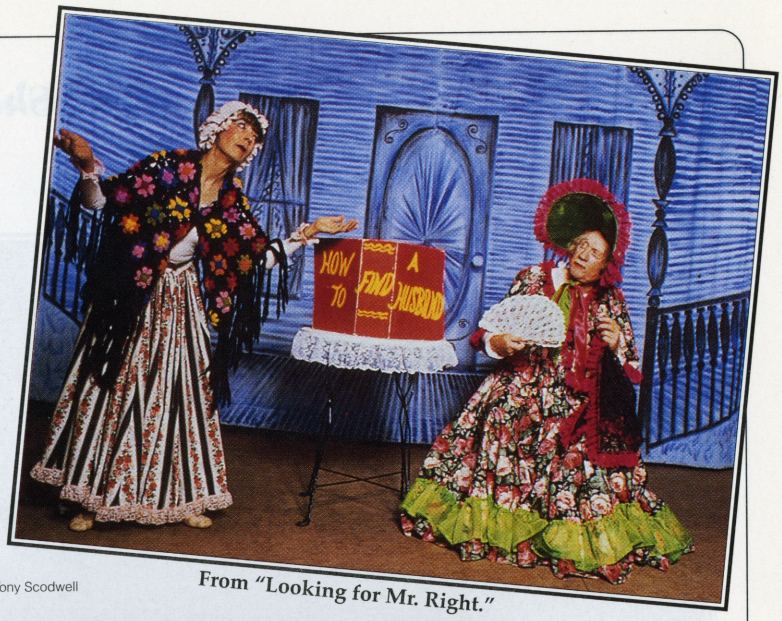
Myself in "Divertissment."

Scene from "Cupid's Mistake" - Myself as Esmeralda
Thomas Willett as Cupid.

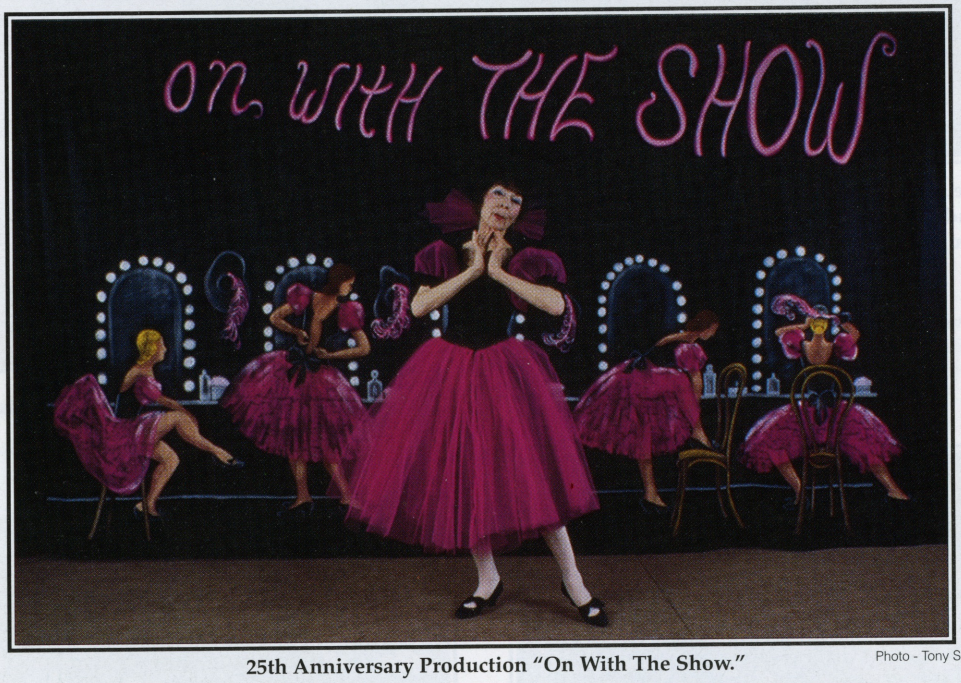
Thomas Willett and Myself from "A Farewell Letter."

Scene from "The Goodtime Cabaret."

Photos - Tony Scodwell



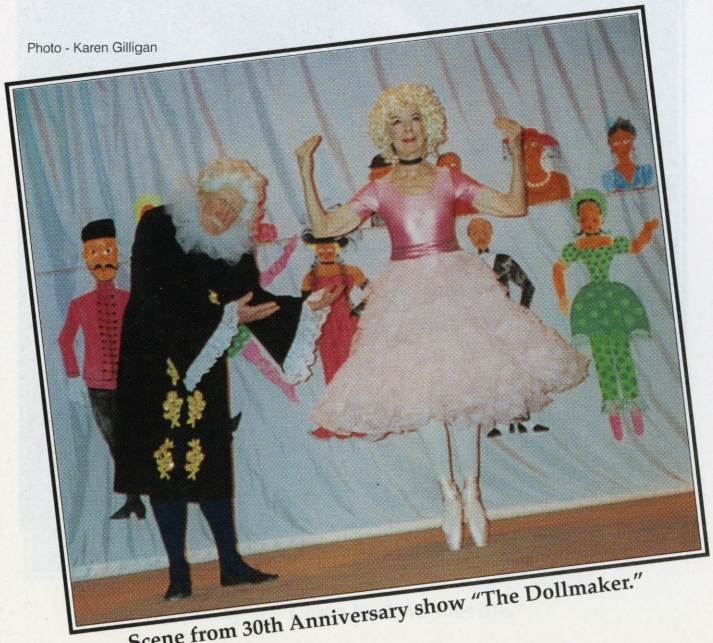
From "Looking for Mr. Right."



25th Anniversary Production "On With The Show."

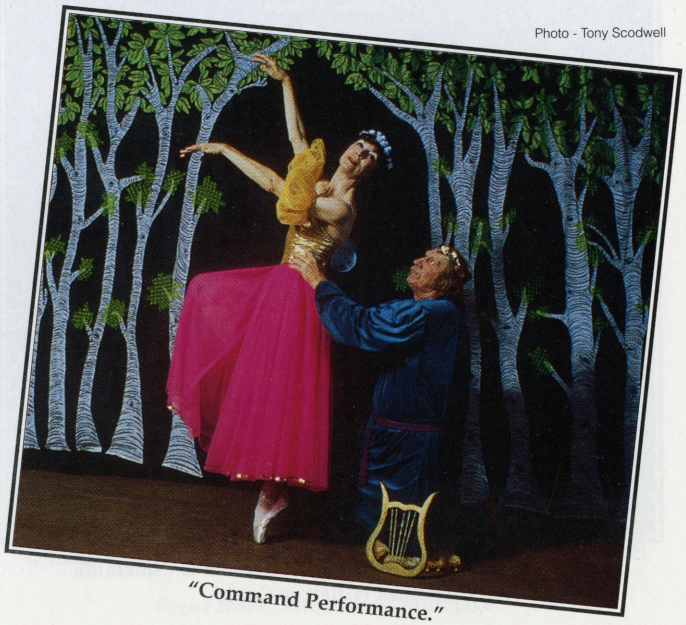
Photo - Tony Scodwell

Photo - Karen Gilligan



Scene from 30th Anniversary show "The Dollmaker."

Photo - Tony Scodwell



"Command Performance."

Contributors toward the publication
of
A THEATRICAL PORTRAIT
Story before the Amargosa Opera House

I want to personally thank the people listed below who have helped make it financially possible to print this 1998 version of my book.

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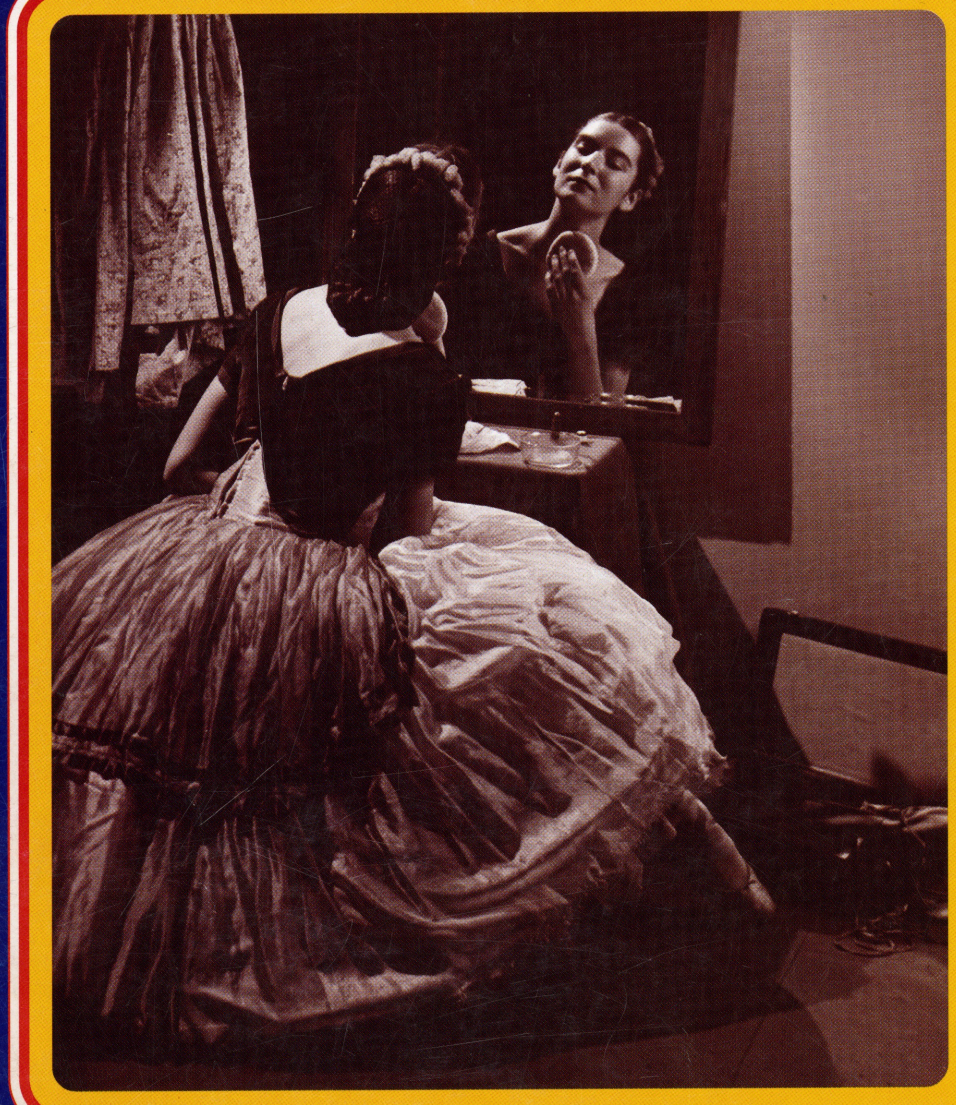
Through twenty years of performing in the Amargosa Opera House, countless stories have been written describing my arrival in Death Valley Junction - from the flat tire, my dancing to an empty house, to the creation of a painted audience silently applauding my stage creations whether any 'real' persons showed up or not. Each author who has written about the Opera House has had his own version. Now I wish to relate mine. This book is a brief summary of my life from the early days in new York to the empty canvas upon which I could finally live out the fantasies I had as a child.

1998 version of this book was designed by David K. Clint and printed by Creel Printing Company in Las Vegas, Nevada.

BACK COVER PHOTO - GLADYS LOUISE RICE

Marta Becket

A Theatrical Portrait



Before The
Amargosa Opera House

"Marta's Story"...

This book is a candid story outlining the highlights of Marta Becket's life journey ...beginning in New York ...and her later "migration" to the Amargosa Valley ...the challenges she has encountered over the years, told in her own words and accompanied by many photographs. Just like her performances and artistic achievements, Marta's story is both entertaining and inspirational!